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The BETRAYAL

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CHAPTER I.

The Face at the Window.

LIKE a clap of thunder the north wind, rushing seaward, seemed suddenly to threaten the ancient little building with destruction. The window sashes rattled, the beams which supported the roof creaked and groined, the oil lamps by which alone the place was lit swung perilously in their chains. A row of maps designed for the instruction of the young—the place was a school-house—commenced a devil's dance against the wall. In the street without we heard the crash of a fallen chimney-pot. My audience of four rose timorously to its feet, and I, glad of the excuse, folded my notes and stepped from the slightly raised platform onto the floor.

"I am much obliged to you for coming," I said, "but I think that it is quite useless to continue, for I can scarcely make you hear, and I am not at all sure that the place is safe."

I spoke hastily, my one desire being to escape from the scene of my humiliation unscathed. One of my little audience, however, was of a different mind. Rising quickly from one of the back seats, she barred the way. Her broad, comely face was full of mingled contrition and sympathy.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Ducaigne," she exclaimed, "it does seem a cruel blow, doesn't it?—and such a beautiful lecture! I tried so hard to persuade Dad and the others to come, but you know how they all love hearing anything about the war, and"—

"My dear Miss Moyat," I interrupted, "I am only sorry that a mistaken sense of kindness should have brought you here. With one less in the audience I think I should have ventured to suggest that we all went round to hear Col. Ray. I should like to have gone myself immensely."

Blanche Moyat looked at me doubtfully.

"That's all very well," she declared, "but I think it's jolly mean of the Duke to bring him down here the very night you were giving your lecture."

"I do not suppose he knew anything about that," I answered, "in any case I can give my lecture again any time, but none of us may ever have another opportunity of hearing Col. Ray. Allow me!"

I opened the door and a storm of sleet and spray stung our faces. Old Pegg, who had been there to sell and collect tickets, shouted to us:

"Shut the door quick, master, or it'll be blown to smithereens. It's a real nor'easter, and a bad 'un at that. Why, the mizzle'll hardly stand. I'll see to the lights and lock up, Master Ducaigne. Better be getting hoam while thee can, for the creeks'll run full to-night."

Once out in the village street I was spared the embarrassment of conversation. We had to battle the way step by step. We were drenched with spray and the driving rain. The wind kept us breathless, making any attempt at speech. We passed the village hall, brilliantly lit; the shadowy forms of a closely packed crowd of people were dimly visible through the uncurtained windows. I fancied that my companion's clutch upon my arm tightened as we hurried past.

We reached a large gray-stone house fronting the street. Miss Moyat laid her hand upon the handle of the door and motioned to me to enter.

I shook my head.

"Not to-night," I shouted, "I am drenched."

She endeavored to persuade me.

"For a few moments, at any rate," she pleaded, "The others will not be home yet, and I will make you something hot. Father is expecting you to supper."

I shook my head and staggered on. At the corner of the street I looked behind. She was holding on to the door handle, still watching me, her skirts blowing about in strange confusion. For a moment I had half a mind to turn back. The dead loneliness before me seemed imbued with fresh horrors—the loneliness, my fireless grate and empty larder. Moyat was at least hospitable. There would be a big fire, plenty to eat and drink. Then I remembered the man's coarse hints, his unveiled references to his daughters, his wish to see them settled in life, his superabundance of whiskey and his only half-veiled tone of patronage. The man was within his rights. He was the rich man of the neighborhood, corn dealer, farmer and horse breeder. I was an unknown and practically destitute stranger, come from heaven knew where, and staying on—because it took a little less to keep body and soul together here than in the town. But my nerves were all raw that night, and the thought of John Moyat with his hearty voice and slap on the shoulder was unbearable. I set my face homeward.

From the village to my cottage stretched a perfectly straight road, with dykes on either side. No sooner had I passed the last house and set my foot upon the road than I saw strange things. The marshland, which on the right reached to the sea, was hung here and there with sheets of mist driven along the ground like clouds before an April tempest. White flakes of spray, salt and luminous, were dashed into my face. The sea, in-driven up the creeks, swept the road in many places. The cattle, trembling with fear, had left the marshland and were coming, lowing, along the high path which bordered the dyke. And all the time an undertone of terror, the thunder of the sea rushing in upon the land, came like a deep monotonous refrain to the roaring of the wind.

Through it all I battled my way, hatless, soaked to the skin, yet finding a certain wild pleasure in the storm. By the time I had reached my little dwelling I was exhausted. My hair and clothes were in wild disorder, my boots were like pulp upon my feet. My remaining strength was expended in closing the door. The fire was out, the place struck cold. I staggered toward the easy chair, but the floor seemed suddenly to heave beneath my feet. I was conscious of the fact that for two days I had had little to eat, and that my larder was empty. My limbs were giving way, a mist was before my eyes and the roar of the sea seemed to be in my ears, even in my brain. My hands went out like a blind man's, and I suppose broke my fall. There was rest at least in the unconsciousness which came down like a black pall upon my senses.

It could only have been a short time before I opened my eyes. Some one was knocking at the door. Outside I could hear the low panting of a motor-car, the flashing of brilliant lamps threw a gleam of light across the floor of my room. Again there came a sharp rap-

